

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000834

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS
NSC FOR DORMANDY

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: PRESIDENT TALKS POSITIVELY ON JOINT MECHANISM IN PUBLIC BUT NO ACTION (YET)

REF: COLOMBO 797

Classified By: Charge' d'Affaires James F. Entwistle. 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In a May 3 address to religious leaders, President Kumaratunga publicly expressed her desire to conclude a Joint Mechanism with the Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for distribution of aid in tsunami-affected areas. Kumaratunga said the Joint Mechanism would be the path to peace for the Tigers and predicted that a majority of the country supported the proposal. MPs on both sides of the Parliamentary well were less sanguine about the President's commitment to signing the Joint Mechanism. Norwegian Ambassador Brattskar praised the speech but said it needed to be followed by action. The President will have to commit her words to action before her fellow citizens or the international community believe her. We will see if either personal gain or the national interest is enough to compel her to sign. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PRESIDENT POSITIVE ON MECHANISM: On May 3, President Chandrika Kumaratunga spoke to leaders of Sri Lanka's four main religions, requesting their support for the Joint Mechanism between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the LTTE. Meeting with the clergy during the religious committee meeting of the National Advisory Council for Peace and Reconciliation, the President said that the Joint Mechanism -- to distribute tsunami aid in the North and East -- was the path to bring the LTTE to the peace table and the governing process. In her remarks, Kumaratunga characterized the LTTE's willingness to cooperate through the Joint Mechanism as a sign of the group's acceptance of Sri Lankan sovereignty.

¶3. (C) The President is further quoted as saying that if a referendum were held on the mechanism, the GSL would win 60 percent of the vote. The Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) -- the President's party -- and a majority of the United National Party (UNP) -- the opposition party -- support the Joint Mechanism, according to the President. Critics of the mechanism offered no alternatives, she said. To underscore her commitment, Kumaratunga even went so far as to say the Joint Mechanism was more important than her government or even her presidency. "The government may fall...I might lose the Presidency. But those things are not of national interest unlike bringing lasting peace to the country."

¶4. (C) ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS: In a May 4 meeting with polchief, Dinesh Gunawardena, Minister of Urban Development, said he did not think that Kumaratunga would sign the Joint Mechanism. He stated that the President's intent could not be determined by what she says to religious leaders. According to Gunawardena, the President has not yet presented the agreement to the Cabinet or to party leaders within the government's ruling alliance. He said he had not seen a draft of the document. If the Joint Mechanism is limited to tsunami-affected areas, then it could be a good step, he said. If it covers wide tracts of the north and east not affected by the tsunami, then he would be less supportive of the mechanism.

¶5. (C) Parliamentarians of the opposition UNP also warned that the President could not be taken at her word just based on speeches she makes at the convention center. Mahinda Samarasinghe, Chief Minority Whip, told Charge' on May 4 that the UNP was completely on board with the Joint Mechanism concept.

¶6. (C) NORWEGIANS NOT YET CONVINCED: In a May 4 conversation with Charge', Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar said he found the speech "very encouraging." But, Brattskar noted, the speech needs to be accompanied by action and he sees no sign of that so far.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: The President has a well-earned reputation for ad libbing during public speeches and clearly many feel the May 3 comments were more of the same. Her remarks, however, are the most positive ones on the Joint Mechanism since her return to the island over a week ago. But, time is running out for the President's encouraging words to be translated into concrete action. End Comment.

ENTWISTLE